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News Releases

Millennium Cohort Study Examines Self-Reported Back Pain and Combat Deployment

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130719-N-SD120-001 OKINAWA, Japan (Aug. 7, 2013) Engineering Aide 2nd Class Randy Stump passes a seabag to Steelworker 3rd Class Brandon Fletcher as Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 5 prepares to redeploy their advanced party back to Port Hueneme, Calif. NMCB-5 had Seabees deployed to 20 locations in 13 countries in the Pacific region. After an eight month deployment, NMCB-5 is turning over all of their missions in the U.S. Pacific Command to NMCB-3. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class John P. Curtis/Released)

SAN DIEGO – Recent research from the Millennium Cohort Study found that military personnel who deployed with combat experiences were more likely to report back pain after deployment than service members who deployed without combat experience. Study findings were recently published in the November issue of Spine.

Researchers conducted an analysis of 53,933 Millennium Cohort participants who did not report back pain at baseline but did self-report back pain at follow-up, which was 3.9 years on average. The Millennium Cohort Study began in 2000 to assess the long-term health outcomes of military service. The study currently has over 200,000 enrolled participants.

According to the study, military personnel who had combat deployments had 38 percent higher odds of reporting back pain at follow-up and 27 percent higher odds of having repeated back pain than service members who deployed without combat. Researchers suggest that deployment length may impact back pain risk due to sustained operations and prolonged wearing of protective armor.

Researchers also found that service members with physically demanding work environments also had higher odds of back pain. Military personnel in service support and supply handling positions had increase odds of back pain compared with those in functional support and administrative occupations.

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Additional risk factors may include genetics, age, sex, enlisted rank, obesity, high workload, and smoking. Study authors observed an increase in odds of back pain in former and current smokers, consistent with previous reports linking smoking and musculoskeletal disorders.

The study also found that service members who did not deploy had 18 percent higher odds of having repeated back pain than those who deployed without combat. Study authors suggest this may be due to chronic back pain increasing the likelihood of being disqualified for deployment. Researchers indicate these data are challenging to capture at the larger population-based level and future studies of smaller populations may be warranted.

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